

Nature and kinship on a phinisi

Explore the pristine islands and waters of the Coral Triangle in Indonesia on a luxury yacht built out of love for family

Stacey Chia

INDONESIA – The Coral Triangle of Indonesia sits right in the centre of the archipelago, where phinisi yachts have plied its waters for centuries.

I am on a five-day voyage in this ecological wonderland renowned for its extraordinary biodiversity and breathtaking underwater scenery. It is also home to 75 per cent of the world's coral species.

Starting March 20, Jetstar Asia will be the first airline to operate non-stop flights from Singapore to Labuan Bajo in Indonesia, one of the Celestia yacht's popular departure points.

Friends from London, San Francisco, Kuala Lumpur and New York City (NYC) have gathered on Celestia, one of the luxury phinisi yachts sailing in the Flores Sea.

For us, Celestia is an extra special treat, as it was co-founded by our friend Jasmine Tabalujan Chong and her brother Jason Tabalujan in June 2023. Chong, 37, is a fashion designer based in NYC, and Mr Tabalujan, 44, is a fund manager based in Jakarta.

For the siblings, the phinisi is a physical dedication of love to their family, as they grew up going on regular seafaring vacations in the Coral Triangle. Both their paternal and maternal families trace their roots across Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore.

Celestia is a classic phinisi in every sense. Traditional in style, it is handcrafted from ironwood, following centuries of boat-making tradition by the Bugis seafarers of South Sulawesi.

The yacht features chic modern interiors by renowned Singaporean and Cape Town-based interior designer Deirdre Renniers, and incorporates the dreamy aesthetic that defines Chong's New York-based eponymous fashion label.

During a trip on Celestia, which can range in duration from three to 14 nights, guests can curate adventures to destinations like Raja Ampat, Komodo, Alor and the Spice Islands, where they can get scuba diving certified or embark on breathtaking hikes.

The yacht also offers a languid pace for those who want to luxuriate and unwind – and, coming off a 48-hour journey from NYC, I fully intend to relax.

At 45m long, Celestia features seven cabins of varying sizes. I share one of the deluxe staterooms, a cabin on the lower deck, with a friend. It is a cosy 14 sq m, though other cabins go up to 39 sq m. There are also multiple communal spaces for conversation, reading and quiet contemplation, all surrounded by the crystal-clear waters of the Flores Sea.

I spend my days reading undisturbed under the sun, cooling



Stacey Chia (far left) and Jasmine Tabalujan Chong (left) hiked up to the top of Padar Island.

The writer (right) reading in one of the yacht's many nooks.



off with refreshing dips in the sea with my travel companions before returning to my stack of books. I also get daily massages, which cost US\$60 (S\$80) an hour. Each voyage comes with four hours of complimentary massages to be split among guests.

Our masseuse, Ms Bella Dwi Wahyuni, is highly skilled, and I find myself drifting off to sleep while she unravels the tension knots from my long travels.

While I indulge in relaxation, my companions are off on thrilling underwater adventures – diving multiple times a day, exploring shipwrecks, and spotting manta rays and whale sharks.

Though I am not yet scuba certified, it is hard to resist the pull of

nature in a place like this. Despite my plans to remain on deck, I eventually strap on a snorkel and a pair of flippers to explore the aquatic wonders of the Flores Sea. Shortly into my swim, I spot a giant turtle and swim alongside it, surrounded by schools of colourful fish.

As a city dweller born and raised in Singapore and now living in NYC, this trip is the perfect balance of creature comforts and connecting with nature.

Among the excursions planned by the Celestia crew is a visit to Taka Makassar Island, a playground for marine life. At low tide, we see starfish in their full glory and watch tiger pistol shrimps demonstrating how they build shelter.

We also visit Pink Beach, one of the world's seven pink beaches, its blush hue created by a microscopic organism called foraminifera. Another highlight is our trek on Padar Island, where a 45-minute hike rewards us with breathtaking 360-degree views of half-moon-shaped bays, a perfect spot for picture-taking.

A trip to this part of the world would not be complete without visiting Rinca Island, home to around 1,500 Komodo dragons. Sightings are not guaranteed, as our cruise director Jennifer Tan reminds us, but we are lucky enough to spot several, even witnessing a mating session in progress.

Mealtimes aboard Celestia are an elaborate affair. Each meal consists

of at least three courses, beautifully presented by chef Wayan Kresna Yasa, the former global executive chef at Desa Potato Head Bali and one of Indonesia's top culinary talents. He honed his skills in Michelin-starred kitchens in NYC and Chicago, but chose to return to Indonesia at the height of his career to support his country's culinary scene.

One surprising standout dish is spaghetti carbonara with guanciale made in Bali, which honours the traditional recipe but is lightened for Asian palates by having the sauce prepared in two separate pans to prevent curdling.

Being at sea also means an endless supply of seafood, grilled to perfection, that we also enjoy at an elaborate dinner set up on the beach.

There are other stories of dedication, much like chef Kresna Yasa's. Several members of the crew were also involved in building Celestia, and now continue to see their labour of love on all its voyages. It is a touching anecdote, one that evokes the spirit of kinship I have felt on this journey – surrounded by friends I consider family.

Nightly full-board rates for private charters in 2025 start at US\$13,500 before tax for a maximum of 14 guests. Smaller groups will still have to pay the full price of a private charter.

For bookings and more information, go to celestiayacht.com

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TRAVEL TIPS

To get on Celestia from Singapore, you will have to fly to Bali or Jakarta and then on to Labuan Bajo. Starting March 20, Jetstar Asia will operate twice-weekly flights on Thursday and Sunday from Changi Airport to Komodo International Airport in Labuan Bajo. A round-trip flight in April, with no checked baggage, costs around \$138 based on checks by ST.

There are various points to board Celestia, depending on its sailing route and the time of year. For the Komodo Island Route that I was on, I flew from Singapore to Bali and then on to Labuan Bajo. Airlines such as Batik Air operate flights to Labuan Bajo, which takes around an hour from Bali.

The best months for sailing depend on the chosen routes – May to October for the route I was on, when there is dry weather and gentle winds. Other popular routes are around the Raja Ampat archipelago, best visited from October to the beginning of May; and the Spice Islands, a small archipelago located in the Banda Sea, which can be visited only from end-September to end-October.

The yacht is so stable that for the most part, I barely felt it moving. It is well-equipped with medication for seasickness and other general ailments.

Celestia provides reef-safe sunscreen, which does not contain chemicals that can cause coral bleaching, although it is a good idea to also take along your own. Snap selfies before applying reef-safe sunscreen, as it usually leaves a white cast.

For convenience, take along a small bag to store your personal items such as sunglasses, sunscreen, lip balm, water and other essentials, as you will be spending most of your time on the yacht outside your cabin. It will save you the trouble of going back and forth.

Take along waterproof shoes that you can slip on and off for the various wet and dry landings.

How a pair of siblings built a luxury yacht

New York City (NYC) emptied out in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and Americans with family in other states of the country returned to their childhood homes.

However, for those like fashion designer Jasmine Tabalujan Chong, returning home to Malaysia – where she was born and lived until she was 15 before moving to Melbourne, Australia, for boarding school – was nearly impossible.

This was also around the time her ready-to-wear eponymous womenswear label was gaining momentum after her debut on the American fashion reality series *Making The Cut* (2020 to 2022).

"Everything felt very uncertain. We didn't know when we would see each other again or when the travel bans would be lifted, and we would talk about our perfect family vacations," says Chong, describing a typical long-distance phone call with her brother, Mr Jason Tabalujan, 44, a fund manager based in Jakarta and an Indo-



Designer Jasmine Tabalujan Chong and Mr Jason Tabalujan are behind the yacht Celestia. PHOTO: CELESTIA

nesian citizen who was born in Singapore.

These phone calls led the siblings to create their dream vacation: a 45m handcrafted phinisi luxury yacht, which, like many things during the pandemic, was built over many Zoom calls.

The process took two years, with Chong, 37, in NYC and Mr Tabalujan in Jakarta. He made regular trips to Bulukumba in South Sulawesi, where traditional phinisi yachts are built, to oversee the group of 10 builders hand-

crafting the yacht.

Despite a 12-hour time difference, they talked for about three hours daily over Zoom, ensuring every detail was thought through.

They called the phinisi Celestia, which means eminently delightful. It is also a reference to the glorious sunsets and sparkling celestial constellations that can be seen in Indonesia's Coral Triangle, a region the siblings had visited many times with their family.

For centuries, phinisi yachts

have been cruising through the Indonesian archipelago and journeying to destinations such as Melaka in Malaysia, Myanmar, Vietnam and Australia as part of the spice trade.

Originating from South Sulawesi, this art of boat building was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Unesco) in 2017.

The siblings have family history tracing back to this region, and are in fact one of the few local

families running luxury phinisi yachts.

The yacht was solely funded by Mr Tabalujan, though the siblings declined to mention how much it cost.

In January, Celestia was included in the official 2025 Golden Globe Awards gift book for winners and presenters to claim a five-day trip, among other gifts and experiences, a sign that Hollywood celebrities might soon find their way on board.

The yacht was also a finalist in the Transportation category in Hospitality Design magazine's 2024 HD Awards, and shortlisted in the Luxury Ocean Cruise Brand category in the Luxury Travel Gold List Awards 2024, according by Australia-based publication Luxury Travel.

Amid the accolades, the siblings want the yacht to be a source of calm for guests. "One of my favourite experiences on the boat is to just look up. In NYC or any busy city, we're always looking down. With Celestia, we're inviting our guests to look up and be completely overwhelmed by the beauty that they'll see," says Chong.

Stacey Chia